

**Before the  
PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION  
OF SOUTH CAROLINA**

Application of TriCoLink, Inc. for Designation	)	
as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier	)	Docket No. 2021-16-C
Pursuant to Section 214(e)(2) of the	)	
Communications Act of 1934	)	

**DIRECT TESTIMONY OF CHAD LOWDER**

**Q. PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME AND CURRENT EMPLOYMENT.**

**A.** My name is Chad Lowder. I am the Chief Executive Officer of TriCoLink, Inc. ("TriCoLink"). TriCoLink is a newly-formed, wholly-owned subsidiary of Tri-County Electric Cooperative, Inc. (the "Cooperative"), a non-profit rural electric cooperative that is owned by its members.

**Q. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR TESTIMONY?**

**A.** I offer my testimony in support of TriCoLink's application for designation as an Eligible Telecommunications carrier ("ETC") in this proceeding.

**Q. PLEASE STATE A SUMMARY OF YOUR EMPLOYMENT HISTORY AND TRAINING.**

**A.** I have served over seven years as the CEO for Tri-County Electric Cooperative. Prior to becoming the CEO, I was the Manager of Marketing and Government Relations for twelve years. As department manager I oversaw the Cooperative's IT network and the implementation of the automated meter information system (AMI). In 2005, Tri-County became the first South Carolina electric cooperative to be 100% deployed with an

AMI network. This was a three-year conversion project of 18,000 meters and 13 power substations that fully automated the meter reading system.

After accepting the role of CEO in 2014, my team and I improved the financial strength of the Cooperative by restructuring our long-term debt which saved over \$12 million of interest payments. During my tenure as CEO, Tri-County has consistently looked for ways to bring benefit to the member. Most recently, we have worked to improve the governance of the Cooperative by rewriting the corporate bylaws and policies with the purpose of strengthening our commitment of transparency for the member-owners. By taking on this challenge, the Cooperative's bylaws and policies have become a model for the nationwide cooperative network.

**Q. PLEASE DESCRIBE TRICOLINK'S BUSINESS PLANS, INCLUDING THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE PLANS FOR DEPLOYMENT.**

- A. TriCoLink, through its participation in the Rural Electric Cooperative Consortium, has been allocated Rural Digital Opportunity Fund ("RDOF") Phase I support by the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") as a winner in the RDOF Phase I auction. TriCoLink plans to use the RDOF Phase I support to deploy and operate a new fiber-to-the-home network that will provide high-speed Internet access and Voice over Internet Protocol ("VoIP") services to all members of the Cooperative. TriCoLink will deploy high-speed broadband and interconnected VoIP services throughout the RDOF Phase I-eligible census blocks identified in Exhibit A1 to its ETC application in this proceeding. In addition, TriCoLink will provide Lifeline service in the census blocks identified in

Exhibit A2 of its application. A map of TriCoLink's proposed ETC designation area is provided in Exhibit B to its ETC application.

TriCoLink will offer low-latency broadband service at actual speeds of at least 1 Gbps downlink and 500 Mbps uplink and at least 2 TB of monthly data usage. In addition, TriCoLink will provide its customers with voice-grade access to the public switched telephone network through its provision of interconnected VoIP-based voice service.

TriCoLink is committed to complying with the deployment obligations and timetables imposed on RDOF Phase I support recipients by the FCC. Accordingly, it plans to commercially offer voice and broadband service to 40% of a calculated number of locations in South Carolina by no later than the end of the third full calendar year following funding authorization, and 20% each calendar year thereafter.

**Q. ARE YOU AWARE OF OTHER COOPERATIVES IN SOUTH CAROLINA USING FIBER OPTIC INFRASTRUCTURE TO EXTEND BROADBAND AND INTERCONNECTED VOIP-BASED VOICE SERVICES TO THE HOME?**

**A.** Yes. There are multiple companies in South Carolina and around the country that are actively deploying or planning to deploy fiber optic infrastructure to provide broadband and interconnected VoIP services, including CarolinaConnect Cooperative, Inc. and Lynches River Communications, Inc. d/b/a RiverNetConnect.

**Q. WHY ARE RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES PARTICULARLY WELL-SUITED TO PARTNER WITH TO PROVIDE FIBER TO THE HOME SERVICES?**

**A.** Rural electric cooperatives are particularly well-suited to partner with to deploy broadband in unserved rural areas because the areas where rural electric cooperatives own infrastructure are often in areas unserved by broadband. The typical cooperative's non-profit cooperative business model is based on long-term plant investment regardless of customer density. That model fits well with fiber optic deployment. Moreover, cooperatives have a long history of superior customer service, affordable rates, and reliability that will be carried into TriCoLink's culture.

**Q. WHY IS FIBER OPTIC OR BROADBAND SERVICE SUCH A NECESSITY TO THE GENERAL POPULATION, BOTH FOR INDIVIDUAL HOMES AND BUSINESSES?**

**A.** Fiber is a long-term investment that meets the needs of broadband demand growth for the next few decades. No other technology can attract economic development investment. Businesses do not locate in areas because of other technologies like they will for fiber offerings. Fiber is the only technology today that can meet the needs of growing demand of bandwidth consumption. Fiber's low latency - delays unnoticeable to humans - is also ideal for utility communications and time sensitive switching applications.

**Q. PLEASE DESCRIBE THE MEANS, MANNER, AND METHOD BY WHICH TRICOLINK INTENDS TO EXTEND FIBER OPTIC TO THE HOME.**

**A.** The fiber optic plant will be constructed in the electric space on the pole and will follow existing underground routes to all substations, electric distribution devices, and eventually to all meter locations of the Cooperative.

**Q. HOW DOES TRICOLINK PLAN TO PROCEED IF GRANTED ETC STATUS?**

**A.** TriCoLink seeks ETC designation from the Commission to serve the RDOF Phase I-eligible census blocks that are listed in Exhibit A1 of its ETC application. Subject to being granted ETC designation by this Commission, TriCoLink will deploy broadband and interconnected VoIP-based voice services throughout the census blocks in which it was awarded RDOF Phase I subsidies by the FCC, as well as in additional areas within and adjacent to its parent cooperative's electric service territory and in compliance with applicable state laws.

**Q. IS TRICOLINK QUALIFIED UNDER FEDERAL AND STATE LAW TO RECEIVE THESE FUNDS?**

**A.** As shown in its application for designation as an ETC, TriCoLink meets all the federal and state regulatory requirements for ETC designation. Designating TriCoLink as authorized to receive RDOF Phase I support, as well as federal Lifeline support, in the census blocks requested will serve the public interest by enabling TriCoLink to provide voice and broadband services to consumers and businesses in its proposed ETC designation area, as well as subsidized broadband and/or voice services to qualifying households.

**Q. DOES THIS CONCLUDE YOUR TESTIMONY?**

**A.** Yes.

**VERIFICATION**

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA    )  
  )  
COUNTY OF CALHOUN         )

I, Chad T. Lowder, state that I am the Chief Executive Officer of TriCoLink, Inc.; that I have read the direct testimony being submitted to the Public Service Commission in Docket number 2021-16-C. That I know the testimony contained therein to be true and correct to the best of my information, knowledge, and belief. That I am authorized to make this direct testimony on behalf of TriCoLink, Inc.



Chad T. Lowder  
Chief Executive Officer  
TriCoLink, Inc.

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA    )  
  )         PROBATE  
COUNTY OF CALHOUN         )

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 16<sup>th</sup> day of eMarch, 2021.



Notary Public of South Carolina  
My Commission Expires: 2-1-31